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ABSTRACT

At a time when school leaders are trying to move from educational fads to transforming schools into effective learning communities, strategies to accomplish this end continue to elude many administrators even though they may be familiar with the desired results. School transformations, which are long-lasting and fad resistant, require all teachers, students, staff, parents, and other individuals associated with the institution to be continuous learners. This paper discusses seven basic strategies to assist the school leader in transforming the school into an effective learning community: (1) a shared purpose, covenant, and mission; (2) a school vision; (3) expertise in profession; (4) symbolic leadership; (5) team learning; (6) proactive leadership practices; and (7) reflective practices. The paper concludes with a list of the strategies and related practices for each. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/ND)

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Transforming Schools Into Effective Learning Communities

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Transforming Schools into Effective Learning Communities

ABSTRACT

At a time when school leaders are trying to move from educational fads to transforming schools into effective learning communities, strategies to accomplish this end continue to elude many administrators. Though the desired results are known by some administrators, it is not clear to them what they should do to develop their schools into a community of learners. People continue to expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire (Senge, 1990, p.3). Therefore, it is possible for school administrators to transform schools into effective learning communities with the appropriate strategies.

School transformations, which are long-lasting and fad resistant, require all teachers, students, staff, parents, and other individuals associated with the institution to be continuous learners. Schools are social institutions. So, to successfully transform a school, all individuals in the school and associated with the school must become an institution of learners. Schools are now expected not only to offer education, but to ensure learning (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p.5). In this regard, this paper provides the school leader with strategies to transform the school into an effective learning community. More specifically, the paper describes and deliniates strategies to transform the school, from areas as follows: (1) a purpose, convenant, and mission, (2) school vision, (3) expert in your profession, (4) a symbolic leader, (5) team learning, (6) proactive leadership practices, (7) reflective practices to improve decisions.

Transforming Schools Into Effective Learning Communities

At a time when school leaders are trying to move from educational fads to transforming schools into effective learning communities, strategies to accomplish this end continue to elude many administrators. Though the desired results are known by some administrators, it is not clear to them what they should do to develop their schools into a community of learners. People continue to expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire (Senge, 1990, p.3). Therefore, it is possible for school administrators to transform schools into effective learning communities with the appropriate strategies.

School transformations, which are long-lasting and fad resistant, require all teachers, students, staff, parents, and other individuals associated with the institution to be continuous learners. Schools are social institutions. So, to successfully transform a school, all individuals in the school and associated with the school must become an institution of learners. Schools are now expected not only to offer education, but to ensure learning (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p.5). What can be done to develop and transform schools to ensure student learning? Will a better understanding of school purpose, covenant, and mission assist with a resolve to this question? Will strategies to develop a better school vision increase staff commitment to improvement practices? Will becoming an expert school leader increase the administrators ability to influence staff and make changes in the organization? Will demonstrating the behavior of a symbolic leader assist the administrator in transforming a school organization? Will establishing team learning in a school organization facilitate meaningful transformation? Will the practice of proactive leadership assist the school toward sustaining changes? Will the utilization of reflective practices assist the school leader with improving and making better decisions? Administrators, therefore, in an era where change is advocated constantly must have a well grounded responses for each of the above proposed questions.

A Shared Purpose, Covenant, and Mission

A shared purpose, covenant, and mission enable individuals in the school to have congruent values and beliefs that define for all a way of life that is committed to quality teaching and learning. With this congruency, the outcomes of purpose, covenant, and mission position schools to make long-lasting transformations. The covenant of shared values determines for the school what is right and good. The purpose conveys meaning to why we have schools and who we are responsible for teaching. The mission outlines the school's obligations and duties and spells out what must be done to meet commitments. This strategy will transform a school into an effective learning community because it forces for all who work in the school to constantly answer the question, "Is it in our mission?".

A good mission statement assists each staff person to know the direction and the priorities in the school or organization. The mission provides the direction, the priorities, and the criteria to guide organizational decision making and help resolve conflicts (Galbraith and Lawler, 1993. P. 129).

The school mission, when it is developed properly, will assist administrators with moral, ethical or conflicting choices. Issues of accessability, best instructional practices, grouping or tracking of students, control and freedom for students, meeting individual and group needs, balancing success and failure, and balancing change and stability have unlimited potential for presenting leaders with ethical dilemmas (Carlson, 1996, p.155). It is, therefore, with quality expressions in the mission that a school leader can gain consensus on these issues and capture and harness the energy flow in the organization.

The school mission statement should be a quality expression that reflect the values guiding and controlling the behavior of teachers and others associated with the school. Attributes of a school mission statement are as follows: (1) written in qualitative rather than quantitative terms (e.g., We believe that student achievement is our most important product instead of we want everyone to raise their achievement scores by one whole grade level), (2) inspire all individuals within the school and in such a fashion that anyone involved in the school who reads it can embrace its content and its intent and (3) give guidance to virtually every decision made within a building (Gorton and Schneider, 1991, p.28).

A School Vision

A school vision helps the school leader to recognize the "big picture" and provides direction for the transformation process. A school vision gives the educational leader the mental ability to see the school as it is now, as compared with the way it is desired to be. When this vision is shared, it creates a powerful force bonding people together around common themes. With bonding in place, the school is transformed from an organization to a community (Sergiovanni, 1995, p.187). Hence, a community defined by Sergiovanni is a collection of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together bound to a set of shared ideas and ideals.

Visionary leadership means more than setting directions for followers to go. It also means seeing possibilities to make something better. Leaders who can see the possibilities know their business, know how to access the markets and environments, can mobilize their people to generate ideas and plans, know their customers, and are able to do a lot of things to make something happen (Galbraith and Lawler, 1993, p.265).

To transform a school into an effective learning community, each employee must have unity of vision for the organization and share perceived possibilities for improving student achievement. When unity of vision and shared perceptions of the business context prevail, employees tend to be high-performing (Ulrick and Lake, 1990, p. 62). Thus, it is without question, when school employees become high-performing, the school is an effective learning community.

Expert in Profession

Many teachers have felt for a long time that their principals could not function as instructional leaders because they did not possess instructional expertise. It is much easier

and compelling for an individual to come to a person for serious assistance if the school leader is perceived as an expert. Followers coming to leaders for their expert opinions concerning school matters enable the school administrator to have meaningful opportunities to transform the organization into a more effective learning community. Being an expert in your profession also makes it possible for the leader to have a greater visible presence in the classroom and become a more symbolic leader.

Though having expert knowledge is a worthy human characteristic for a school leader to possess , to gain the cooperation of others; however, it appears many school leaders lack the required special knowledge and skills to help teachers achieve their goals. An administrator can successfully influence teachers if the actions are based on expertise as a source of influence, there is other evidence that regrettably, many administrators seem to lack expertise or are perceived by others as lacking expertise (Gorton and Snowden, 1993, p.62). So it is conceivable that many school leaders will not be able to transform themselves into individuals with the expert knowledge and skills to help teachers with their teaching and classroom management problems.

What can school leaders do to be effective while they are growing in the area of job expertise? These school leaders will need to canvas their staff for expertise in areas where they are deficient or teachers need help. More specifically, these school leaders must delegate the responsibility of providing expert knowledge and skills in the areas of instructional leadership, student discipline, motivating students, conflict resolution, working with groups, curriculum, and program development to those staff members in possession of these abilities.

Symbolic Leader

A symbolic leader is a leading, live symbol of the kind of behavior desired of followers to emulate. Symbolic leadership helps followers to see the "big picture" by emphasizing what is important, what is valued, and what is wanted.

Symbolic leaders do not assume that everyone sees that whole picture; they use words (spoken and written) and other symbols (such as time, attention, and their personal presence) to continually reemphasize what is important, what is good and what is wanted (Owen, 1991, p.159). Owen (1991) stated, also, that symbolic leaders seek to make clear to subordinates that connections between what they do, on the one hand, what they can do, on the other, toward the achievement of excellence.

Administrators are symbolic leaders in the school. This is, perhaps, an inescapable fact. Students analyze teachers in regard to what they value or believe about teaching and behavior in the classroom. Teachers scrutinize principals with respect to his or her philosophy about schooling, students achievement and who is really responsible for student learning. For instance, I have observed in schools where principals represent that meaningful symbolic behavior they expect in their teachers, the entire school culture or feeling is more like a learning environment. According to Deal and Peterson (1990), one of the most

significant roles of leaders is the creations, encouragement, and refinement of the symbols and symbolic activity that give meaning to the organization (Hart and Bredesom, 1996, p.138).

Our schools represent a composite of many diverse institutions (family, religion, and community). It is, therefore, imperative for the school leader to be symbolic of the behaviors expected. Each institution represents some so called "right set of expectations" for the school leader. To transform the school into a learning community, the school leader must understand and practice symbolic leadership.

Team Learning

The basic concept of team learning is that each member of the team contributes and learns. Schools are made up of several member groups (e.g.. - administrators, teachers, students, support staff, and parents) that must have meaningful participation for the transformation to be an effective learning community. Team learning is one of the key components in promoting a fad free school transformation that is deeply rooted in sustaining shared values and commitments from school member groups. In addition, team learning enhances an employee's capacity to act and help schools adapt quickly to set goals, achieve goals, and remain competitive (Bencivenga, 1995, p.70).

Learning is an individual process. Each member of the team must learn, work together, and help each other to achieve individual and organizational goals. One of the major functions of the brain is learning, a point that should not be ignored by educational organizations; as they grapple with changes in a turbulent and unpredictable environment, a capacity to react, reason, emote, and create will be indispensable (Carlson, 1996, p.95). To have a positive impact on environments of this type, an educational organization must be transformed into effective team learning units, which are constantly, developing and learning new strategies the school can implement to transform organizational inputs (students) into desirable achieving organizational outputs (students). For instance, when team learning is functioning effectively in an educational organization, under achieving students are transformed into achieving students.

Team learning produces a learning organization. This concept is reminiscent of the Gestaltist: "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts". According to Senge (1990), if the people in our organization are collectively discussing issues, they will discover insights not attainable individually (Hughes, 1994, p. 165).

Proactive Leadership Practices

Some school leaders have adopted the practicing philosophy, "if it is not broken, don't fix it." This leadership practice may permit a school to exist; nevertheless, it will not transform a school into a viable learning community. Potential school concerns, if they are recognized, can be corrected before they become problems, which in some cases will reduce the normal time required to return to peak performance. So the proactive leader will

constantly study existing school units for potential weaknesses and implement corrective practices before these situations become problems, maintaining a conducive learning climate for all groups.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is described as informed intuition (Sergiovanni, 1995, p.32). Intuition is a knowledgeable choice or guess. As expressed by Sergiovanni, reflective practice is based on the reality that professional knowledge is different from scientific knowledge. Reflective practice, therefore, provides another strategy for school leaders to transform the school into a learning community by improving the quality of decisions. Decisions are improved by using Schön's three reflective practices: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-while-in-action (Smith and Andrews, 1989, p.4).

School leaders must use Schön's strategies to learn more from their experiences and practices. Schön's thesis is that in order for professionals to meet the challenges of their work, they need to depend less on what they learned in graduate school than what they learned in practice (Smith and Andrews, 1989, p.4). Smith and Andrews (1989) reported Schön's three strategies for reflective practice as follows: (1) reflection in action, exists when the professional reflects about the problem rather than acting impulsively, (2) reflection on action, exists when the professional thinks critically about something that s/he has already done, and (3) reflection while in action, suggest a condition in which the professional is on "automatic pilot" with professional routines and engages in critical inquiry about other things. Thus, it is with these reflective strategies that a school leader can practice to upgrade decisions and assist the school toward transforming into an effective learning community.

Summary

The primary focus of this paper concentrates on seven basic strategies to transform schools into effective learning communities: purpose, covenant, and mission, shared vision, symbolic leadership, team learning, expert in profession, proactive leadership practices, and reflective practices. Without questions, these are important strategies in the school transformation process. However, it would be a mistake for the reader to think that personality and other human relation characteristics are not significant for leaders to transform the school into an effective learning community. Furthermore, in order for schools to improve and become more fad resistant, our school administrators should effectively implement the seven strategies for transformation.

A more delineated list of these strategies to assist the school leader with practices to transform the school into an effective learning community is as follows:

Shared Purpose, Covenant, and Mission

1. -identify what practices in the school the staff is doing right and good

2. -explain the staff the school obligations and duties

3. -write mission statement in qualitative terms
4. -use agreed upon words or expressions in statement that inspire staff.

A School Vision

5. -assist the school staff with recognizing the "big picture" in the organizational student learning process.

6. -help the school staff to perceive possibilities for improving student achievement

Expert in Profession

7. -read books and articles in professional journals on teaching, classroom management and school administration

8. -learn more about teaching by spending more time in the classroom

9. -deploy others in the school organizations, who possess special knowledge in areas where you are weak or deficient.

Symbolic Leader

10. -show staff members what they can do to help students achieve excellence and self movement to excellence.

11. -emphasize in your speech and behavior what is important, what is good and what is wanted in the school organization or community

12. -show in your behavior, daily, that you are a walking symbol of what you want the staff to do and the school to be

Team Learning

13. -permit teachers, students, support staff, and parents to participate in curriculum, instruction, and discipline concerns

14. -help each staff person in the school to experience success with their work

15. -encourage and plan meetings, workshops and etc. to promote staff members to share ideas to improve organizational learning.

Proactive Leadership Practices

16. -study the school organization for potential problems

17. -correct potential and minor problems before they become problems

Reflective Practice

18. -think about the problem, generate possible solution, decide best choice, before acting impulsively

19. -think critically about decisions you have made, use knowledge to improve the next decision

20. -become so familiar with your work that you can engage in other critical inquires while doing something else.

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